

May the force be with women!

Anelise Ennes, who holds a degree in Advertisement from UFRGS, analyzes the women's role in the Star Wars Movie Series



Princess Leia, as well as princess Amidala, has undergone sudden changes in concept throughout the development of the plot in order to fit script needs in her relation to the male heroes.

Text by Yuri Correa

A [survey carried out by researcher Amber Thomas](#) has shown that, in 2016, despite starring several movies released on a large scale around the world, the female voices in Hollywood were still very weak. In the most watched productions of the year, less than 27% of the dialogues were intended for female characters, and the latest movie from the *Star Wars* franchise, *Rogue One: Star Wars Story*, had the worst rates: Jyn Erso (the heroine of the movie, played by Oscar-nominated Felicity Jones) had only 9% of the spoken lines. However, it was before this that the then undergrad student in Advertising and Publicity at UFRGS, Anelise Ennes, identified the secondary role that femininity has taken place in these movies and then decided to focus her final paper on the analysis of feminine presences in the Star

Wars

Universe.

One of the most influential modern references in pop entertainment culture, *Star Wars* has created a representative portrait of a villain (Darth Vader), famous expressions ("May the force be with you") and iconic characters that have never abandoned the popular imagination, such as Jedi Knights, Master Yoda, Chewbacca, and even the robots C3PO and R2D2. The entire plot and its concepts were an original idea by the filmmaker George Lucas, who has been exploring his creation to its fullest in all forms, with sequences, books, videogames and countless toys.

Therefore, despite having grown up knowing what *Star Wars* was, Anelise admits that she had only really got in contact with the movies when she was older. "I used to think Amidala was a bore," she states about the most prominent female character in the so-called new trilogy (released between 1999 and 2005), played by Natalie Portman. Formed during her childhood, this opinion is not unjustified: although vital to the plot, Amidala is not as inserted in the action as the men are, she is almost always apart in most of the action packed sequences and, when she is present in them, she is the victim, or worse, an indifferent figure for the success of the heroes' plans. With no one else to identify with, Anelise did not become interested in the movies until many years later, upon the release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), and even then she realized that every time she got identified with somebody on the screen, it was still with male characters like Han Solo or Luke Skywalker, but never with female figures like Princess Leia. It was this uncomfortable feeling that showed a striking contrast of feelings when she saw Rey (Daisy Ridley), protagonist of the new batch of movies, that has started with *The Force Awakens*. Earlier this year, Anelise had already encountered the character Furiosa (played by Charlize Theron) in the movie *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), and was already considering drawing a profile of the strong women in the movies industry over time for her final paper. However, how would she define what a strong woman is? To achieve this, it would also be necessary to find an opposite, one that is weak. And how could she contextualize this in each time period? Realizing that trying to apprehend these concepts could be goal-challenging, she decided to draw inspiration from the new *Star Wars* character, so strong, so full of representativeness, and investigate the reasons why she, as a woman, has felt so distant from that widely acclaimed fictional world.

However, it was not without a little disappointment that she realized she could not include Rey in her analysis. Along her research she noted that Amidala and Leia, the main female figures in the *Star Wars* universe, could not be evaluated only by their brief first participations. According to the advertiser's work, the plot's needs

around the male heroes had constantly demanded both characters to undergo sudden changes in approaching: in one of the movies, Amidala is a protective mother to the main character, tender but determined to see him pursuing high political goals; in another, she is even portrayed showing cleavage and suggestive clothes, completely unable to resist the juvenile passion between them; in one movie Leia is an impatient woman with a strong personality, perfectly able to handle scoundrels like Han Solo, in another she becomes a calm woman and seems passive about the revelations made by Luke. On the other hand, Rey is the protagonist of this new batch of movies, but she is also surrounded by men. To understand what the final portrayal of this character will be, it is necessary to analyze her entire trajectory, to be ended only in 2019 in the third movie. After all, as promising as the new *Star Wars* heroines may be, Anelise says that they still carry some unfavorable values to feminine representativeness in the movies, such as being objects of sexual desire. "It is still impossible for a friendship between a man and a woman to exist without the guy ending up in love with her", highlights Anelise, pointing out that both movies, *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One*, suggest that the male characters that stay along with Rey and Jim have romantic interests in them. She states that this kind of female visibility is also harmful, because it emphasizes the role of women as an exception, someone who is different from the others and, because of that, is attractive for the men – besides reinforcing the idea that men and women cannot have a friendship without a romantic interest, which reinforces the long-lasting sex and power tension between both genders. Even admitting that we are probably experiencing a phase in which the arts are drastically reacting to a surge in conservative thinking in politics around the world, and that at some point we are going to stabilize this large amount of productions such as *Orange is the New Black*, *Mad Max*, *Sense8*, *Jessica Jones* and other movies and TV shows that celebrate diversity, she hopes for the best for Rey. In the past, Amidala used to subject herself to an abusive relationship with the future Darth Vader, a behavior that, in its turn, makes him not only a villain that we love to hate, but a really despicable one to Anelise. Leia, on the other hand, upon having witnessed her home planet being destroyed, did not even have the right to a mourning scene, and even after that, when she is captured and tortured, the heroes find her in her cell lying down in a suggestive position and joking around. The hope is that the 40 years between the productions will be enough to bring a new vision upon female characters, not only in *Star Wars*, but in Hollywood as a whole.

She analyzes, for instance, how Amidala and Leia were associated to the decline of

the male characters: the first one causes the hero to become a villain, and the second is used by Darth Vader as a bait to bring Luke to the Dark Side. And even in small details, such as the use of the expression “dirtying one’s hands” a reference to the passion between Leia and Han, did not go unnoticed by Anelise. She also brings classic concepts like that one established by Simone de Beauvoir about “becoming a woman”, in order to analyze scenes like the one in which Leia fights to be free, in *Return of the Jedi* (1983), after being forced to dress minimal clothes and being chained to a huge and disgusting male beast. She is immediately “punished” by the movie when the script places on her the need of holding on to a hero who rescues her from captivity taking her in his arms, so preventing her from consolidating her identity as an independent woman. Today, even Disney animations, which have long been responsible for establishing certain standards for women and princesses, have more recently been building a new vision over their main female characters, who are significantly less dependent on princes or on romantic pairs. This kind of expectations subversion is important, explains Anelise, because this is not “only about a movie” or “only about a TV series”; these vehicles portray a framework of our own reality, and young girls – and even adult women – need to see themselves represented in these works of art to understand that if their voice is heard in pop culture, they also have space to speak their minds in the real world. Representativeness empowers oppressed groups by showing the world that all kinds of people are the same and can have the same visibility ordinary straight white men – who are normally at the forefront of Hollywood productions – do.

Translated by Fernanda de Freitas Ávila, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari Becker (IL/UFRGS).